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Thai Diaspora: What Happens When They Return 'Home'?

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The 1868 demarcation of the modern border between British Burma and the Kingdom of Siam resulted in a Thai diaspora of more than 40,000 in the southern states of what is now the modern nation-state of Myanmar. Since the 1980s, the majority of these persons have moved back over the border into Thailand. Their status has become that of a returning Thai diaspora because they have not been granted Thai citizenship. Consequently, they lack the rights and power to access livelihood assets. This paper examines their status vis-à-vis the Thai state, their political mobilization in Thailand, and their development of livelihood strategies. The people of the returning Thai diaspora use a variety of means to establish themselves as subjects and citizens of the Thai state. Policy makers should be encouraged to be more aware of "power" and "rights" with regard to people in vulnerable contexts, such as the returning Thai diaspora whose members are negotiating their status in Thai society.

Keywords: *Thai diaspora, political capital, homeland, returnee, livelihood strategies*

Introduction

In the 1970s, the majority of scholarly discussions of ethnicity and immigration paid little attention to diasporas. The keyword 'diaspora' appeared only once or twice a year in dissertations during that decade, as compared to about 13 times a year in the 1980s, and nearly 130 times in 2001 alone (Safran, 1991; Brubaker, 2005). The concept of 'diaspora' has become a popular subject for researchers and

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policy makers in the last few decades. Many papers have focused the impact of diasporas on socio-economic conditions and politics in the host lands or homelands, focusing on diaspora behavior as two polar opposites of good or bad (Baser & Swain, 2009). However, while 'Diaspora Studies' has been growing rapidly as an academic field, research on the Thai diaspora is relatively limited. Only one dissertation related to the topic was published in 2007. It analyzed Thai diaspora phenomena in terms of political science concepts, such as nation-state, nation and citizenship, diaspora public sphere, and sovereignty (Senakham, 2007). The issues of and gaps in the knowledge about these people can be summarized as follows:

Sociological theories/concepts: Linking the concepts of 'diasporas' and 'livelihoods' may create more understanding of 'transnationalism.' Diasporas are the debated prototypes on fluid-flow, diverse and transnational. The returning Thai diaspora also is a debated prototype on the issue of whether it is composed of generic immigrants or members of a diaspora. Currently, academics have focused on 'transnational livelihoods' because globalization has caused people to have multi-livelihood places and links across the boundaries of cities, provinces, or countries (Scoones, 2009; Rigg & Salamanca, 2009). The returning Thai diaspora has formulated 'transnational livelihoods' as one of its livelihood strategies because of limited access to livelihood assets/capitals in Thai society.

Methodologies: Inquiries on diasporas are focused on 'deterritorialization critiques'; therefore, the majority of research attempts to connect the concept of 'nation-state' with other diaspora issues (Adamson & Demetriou, 2007). This paper analyzes the returning Thai diaspora from the methodology and perspective of livelihoods, viewing its members as humans, not as *'the other'*.

Policy issues: The returning Thai diaspora comprises one of the groups of stateless people in Thailand. Until now, the Thai government has not implemented any clear policies regarding them. Although the Nationality Act 2012 (No. 5) was passed, there are still some conflicts regarding drafting ministry regulations or practical guidelines for government officers. These conflicts are probably a result of the limited number of studies relating to diaspora issues.

Understanding the interaction of the Thai diaspora and Thai society: The majority of diaspora studies aim to describe a diaspora's relationships between host lands and homelands (Siu, 2005). However, several other issues need to be studied, as Gabriel Sheffer (2009) pointed out. These issues include the following: 1) the

basic distinctions between various types of diasporas; 2) contradictory demographic trends (growing size and numbers of diasporas), and assimilation and integration trends; 3) the forming of migrants into new diasporas, focused on the development and survival of diaspora communities rather than their legal definition; 4) diasporas that establish connections with the homeland and maintain identity, patterns of organization, and degree of freedom of collective action of the diaspora community; 5) reasons for adoption and changes in diaspora strategies in the host lands for continued existence; 6) the extent to which the intricate relations between diasporas, host lands, homelands, and other international actors affect the strategies of the diaspora community; and 7) homeland relations, particularly regarding issues of defense.

This paper focuses on interactions between the returning Thai diaspora and Thai society by examining the diaspora community's status vis-à-vis the Thai state, their political mobilization in Thailand, and their development of livelihood strategies. The goal of the paper is to help us understand the experiences of the large groups of people seen as 'others' and learn more about the impact upon society when diasporas return. Illustrative quotes are provided from key informant interviews of Thai diaspora returnees, who were interviewed as part of the first author's dissertation research.

What Is a Diaspora?

The term 'Diaspora' first appeared in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), expressing views of events that divided the Jewish people between those in the homeland and those in exile (Evans, 2009). In the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* published in 1937, 'Diaspora' referred to a very specific case of the Jews who were exiled from the Holy Land and their dispersal throughout several parts of the world. The word connoted uprooting, legal obstacles oppression, and painful adaptation to the host land. The people comprising this diaspora developed a set of institutions, social patterns, and symbols, including language, religion, values, social norms, and continued hope of returning to the homeland. In this context, the Jewish Diaspora who were forced to leave their homeland were distinguished as a prototype or 'classical diaspora paradigm'.

The main characteristics of the people comprising a diaspora include: (1) they have been dispersed from an original 'center' to two or more foreign regions; (2) they

retain a collective memory or myth about their original homeland; (3) they believe that they are not fully accepted in their host societies and remain partly separated; (4) they regard their ancestral home as an ideal place to which they should return; (5) they continue to relate a collective commitment to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its independence, safety and prosperity; (6) they survive as a distinct and minority community to maintain and transmit a cultural/religious heritage derived from their ancestral home; and (7) they reflect their relationships on cultural, religious, economic and political aspects with the homeland in their communal institutions (Safran, 2005; Cohen, 2008).

With the emergence of globalization, the term 'diaspora' has been reconceptualized to encompass phenomena related to increased international population mobility, such as emigration to developed countries, the telecommunication and transportation revolution, and the development of a cosmopolitan global culture. In this way the frontiers among ethnic minorities, refugee flows, migrations, and diaspora emerged (Popescu, 2006). Some additional arguments have been put forth regarding the concept of diaspora as well. Cohen (2008) criticized the list of diaspora criteria that Safran proposed above as being closely identified with the Jewish Diaspora prototype. For this reason, these criteria limit the use of diaspora in different circumstances, i.e. victim, labor, trade, imperial and cultural diasporas. Brubaker (2005) defined the term diaspora in some aspects as *'ethnic communities divided by state frontiers'*. Voutira (2006) also proposed rethinking the basic assumptions of diaspora experiences as being about 'displacement', and understanding the formative processes of new diasporas. An example would be the dramatic case of the 'unintended' disapora of approximately 25 million post-Soviet Russians outside Russia's borders that occurred overnight in 1991.

The Thai Diaspora

Members of the Thai diaspora have lived throughout the entire Tanintharyi Peninsula (formerly Tenasserim) in the southernmost part of Myanmar[3] near the Thai provinces of Prachuap Khiri Khan, Chumphon and Ranong, long before the

[3] The former name of this country was Burma but now it has been changed to Myanmar. Details of how the country's name has been changed over the course of its recent history are given in several sources (for example, Royal Institute, 1989, 2012; Prime Minister's Office-Thailand, 2001; State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), 2008; Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Thailand, 2012; Wikipedia, 2012).

boundary between Britain and Siam was settled in 1868. Although these ethnic Thais live in territories that now belong to the Myanmar nation-state according to the map of the modern world, they believe that they live in 'original' Thai territory and that they are Thai citizens (Senakham, 2007). In this way their situation is similar to the 'unintended' diaspora of post-Soviet Russians (Voutira, 2006). Therefore, the Thai diaspora (in Myanmar) can be categorized as a 'victim diaspora,' based on the arguments of Brubaker (2005) and Voutira (2006). The returning Thai diaspora (in Thailand) can also be categorized as a 'victim diaspora,' based on the definition of Safran (2005) and Cohen (2008), but the latter is a diaspora in their homeland rather than in the host land.

The problems of the Thai diaspora started with the creation of the geo-body and geo-soul of Thailand, formerly known as Siam. By 1932, the monarchic rule and colonial powers had demarcated the 'geo-body' of Siam, but the national soul was not yet fully cultivated. Prime Minister Phibunsongkhram (1897-1964) sought to mold the religio-national identity of Thailand until the religious community's borders coincided with those of the nation-state. The geographic body was infused with a religio-national soul, so the nationalism that developed embraced the fusion of religious identity with national identity (Winichakul, 1994; Ricks, 2008). As a consequence of the boundary demarcation, about 41,258 ethnic Thais became part of a diaspora in Myanmar; they were composed of 18,280 Muslims and 22,978 Buddhists (Senakham, 2007). After the military government of Myanmar began to control Thai communities living in its boundaries, about three-quarters of the Thai diaspora moved to Thailand. Most of them live in Prachuap Khiri Khan, Chumphon and Ranong provinces. After the 'geo-body' was created, the 'geo-soul' was later cultivated and the Thai diaspora believed that they lived within the 'original' boundaries of Thailand and they were Thai citizens. Therefore, they are the 'returnees' who are going back 'home'.

The 'Thai diaspora', in Thai official documents is known as 'displaced persons with Burmese nationality and Thai race' (ผู้พลัดถิ่นสัญชาติพม่าเชื้อสายไทย). It consists of two groups as reported in the memorandum of the Secretariat of the National Security Council (SNSC) on 7 January 1997, which is the official document presented to the Council of Ministers on 27 May 1997. These groups are: 1) Thai people who migrated to work in Myanmar and came back after the repression of minority groups, and 2) Thai people who lost land after the boundary demarcation between Britain and the Kingdom of Siam, i.e. in Dawei (Tavoy), Myeik (Mergui), and Tanintharyi (Tenasserim). The Thai government considered these groups of people to be Thai

not Burmese, so they can obtain citizenship as 'naturalized citizens'. The elder returning Thai diaspora who have lived in Prachuap Khiri Khan Province longer than three decades are not considered to be Thai, though they have long protested their status: *"...we are Thai not Burmese; we lost territory, not nationality. Why does the government force us to change our nationality?"*[4]

What Happens When the Thai Diaspora Return 'Home'?

Globalization has caused people to have livelihoods in more than one place and have links across the boundaries of cities, provinces or countries. These links can be the catalyst for cultural, demographic, economic, political and social change. Nowadays, there are more diaspora communities who 'return home'. These returnees face 'homelands' that do not recognize them, and confront legal obstacles, oppression, and painful adjustment.

Since the 1970s, the government of Myanmar has been exerting more control over these communities, resulting in a series of migrations of ethnic Thais from Myanmar to Thailand in the 1980s. However, the members of this Thai diaspora group have not been granted Thai citizenship and therefore have not obtained any rights associated with their livelihoods. Their status has become that of the 'returning Thai diaspora' who are 'stateless Thais' in Thai society (Senakham, 2007). They are a diaspora in their homeland much like the *Nikkeijin*, the descendants of Japanese diaspora in Brazil and Peru who returned to Japan in the 1990s forming separate ethnic groups from the native Japanese people (Reyes-Ruiz, 2005; Shoji, 2005). Still another similar case is that of the *Viet-kieu*, the overseas Vietnamese scattered in over 90 countries around the world who are returning to their former homeland in increasing numbers (Carruthers, 2008).

The Thai diaspora has been recognized since the Thai government sponsored the Social Investment Fund (SIF) for poor people in 2002. Some NGOs worked closely with poor people in Ranong Province, promoting the Saving Scheme and recruiting members with ID cards. But many poor people had neither ID cards nor any other documents identifying them. After being interviewed, they became known as part of the Thai diaspora or as one of the groups of stateless people who have lived

[4] Key informant interview, Thai diaspora returnee from Myanmar to Thailand in 1974.

in Thai society for a long time. After the Indian Ocean tsunami struck the southern part of Thailand in 2004, this Thai diaspora community became more widely recognized. Many affected people, including those belonging to the Thai diaspora, could not receive any help from social welfare agencies or NGOs because they did not have ID cards or any other documents of identification. Subsequently, the situation of the Thai diaspora became known to Thai society.

Although the returning Thai diaspora identify themselves as Thai, speak and write the Thai language, maintain Thai cultural practices, etc., the Thai government treats them as 'the other' or 'persons who do not have Thai nationality.' Thus, they do not have legal rights to assets or the means of basic livelihoods. For example, they have no legal right to own land, housing, vehicles, etc; and they are not allowed to travel beyond the borders of their residential provinces.

Moreover, they do not have any kind of political rights. Without Thai identity cards, they cannot be hired legally; and being illegal workers, they are paid low wages and often are not even paid. However, they have created livelihood strategies for surviving in Thai society, and have also voiced their problems many times. The elder returning Thai diaspora retains his collective memory about a peaceful, happy, and resourceful life:

> *"…in the old village (in Myanmar), we were happy because we had everything – herds of cows and buffalo, hundreds of elephants, wide farmlands, huge wild animals that we could hunt, etc. Life was full of resources there and we had so many assets from selling domestic and wild animals to Thailand…"*
>
> *"...Thai people (in Myanmar) built big houses and had gardens close to the river; they didn't live clustered together as they do now. But everyone knew each other because every Buddhist Day, they would gather at the wat (the community temple). The wat was the center and the mechanism of connecting with each other. Here (in Thailand), we can build only small impermanent houses because we have no right to own land. Previously, we owned gardens so we hired Burmese laborers to work on our gardens. Now, we work as non-contracted laborers or fishing crews; this is something we have never done before…"* [5]

[5] Key informant interview, Thai diaspora returnee from Myanmar to Thailand in 1976.

The story above helps us understand in a concrete sense the term *'uprooting'*. The people's livelihoods have been totally changed from a life full of resources (in Myanmar) to one in which they have virtually nothing (in Thailand). The choices for formulating livelihood strategies of the returning Thai diaspora are different from those of Thai people in general, constructed from processes that include multiple approaches to respond to contrasting needs. The *'sets of activities'* that the returning Thai diaspora use for coping and surviving include those listed below.

- **Human Capital:** *'Household members'* in the older generation may not be different from other members. But the younger people are encouraged to marry Thai citizens in order to gain citizenship for their children and seek those who can be livelihood asset owners, etc. *'Occupations'*, they are not allowed to travel beyond provincial boundaries either for work or study. Consequently, most of the people work as local laborers in construction, fishing, or in factories, and some are merchants at local markets. In this sense *'labor'* is the source of livelihood. *'Health'* - before 2010, they could get health services from the Thai government but had to pay in full for treatment. Since the beginning of 2011, they have received free primary health care from the government but only in provincial boundary areas. This support has resulted from their efforts to make their voices heard.

- **Natural Capital:** *'Access to land'* - they cannot legally own land. Consequently, some engage in agriculture on small plots rented from landlords and some go farming across the border in Myanmar. *'Natural resources'* include fishery resources from canals and the sea. The majority of natural capital brought from Myanmar includes wood (tree stumps), orchids, bamboo shoots, etc.

- **Social Capital:** Previously, the wat was the center of their social connection. Now, *'networks'* are considered the key factor upon which the returning Thai diaspora draws in pursuit of their livelihood objectives. These include networks and relations that increase people's trust and ability to work together and link to other capital assets which can assist in increasing well-being. They also include memberships in local associations and networks such as savings groups and the Restoring Thai Nationality Problem Solving Network, etc. However, social capital is limited because of the inability to travel beyond provincial boundaries.

- **Financial Capital:** For sources of finance and credit, the returning Thai diaspora access financial capital through social capital. They organize credit and savings schemes by themselves because they cannot partake of bank services. *'Savings Groups'* are the

channels and core activities that encourage participation, collaboration, and connection of returning Thai diaspora communities.

• **Physical Capital:** The returning Thai diaspora cannot own livelihood assets which require the certificates of properties ownership such as a house, car, motorbike, etc. Again, social capital is the key factor for overcoming this limitation. They must trust and let their kin, relative, son/daughter-in-law, or even a neighbor who has citizenship be the owner of these assets. They can use infrastructure and facilities together with Thai people in the communities as physical capital for achieving their livelihood outcomes. But they have no right to petition when they face infrastructure problems. For example, the community water supply was damaged for almost two years, so they had to buy water for 1,500 baht from truck carrying water instead of 30 baht a month from a community water supply committee.

'Risk' is the main factor that the returning Thai diaspora must consider in formulating choices either in Thailand or Myanmar. The risks include, for example, engaging in dangerous work on fishing boats, working without pay (being cheated of wages or sometimes being prevented from taking purchased wood across the border), or encountering armed conflict between the Burmese military against ethnic minorities in border areas.

There are debates over whether the members of the returning Thai diaspora are generic immigrants or a diaspora. In the concept of diaspora, *'home'* means a place of no return. It is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. However, this concept has become increasingly blurred and more broadly interpreted to mean the place of origin, the place of settlement, a local, national or transnational place, or an imagined community. *'Homeland'* has a sense of searching for 'roots' as well as motherland, fatherland, native land, or the ancestral land (Cohen, 2007).

The returning Thai diaspora claim Thailand as their "father's home-mother's land" (บ้านพ่อเมืองแม่). So, 'the returnees who are going back home,' as mentioned above, have more legitimacy than other aliens or minority groups to negotiate with the Thai state for restoring their Thai citizenship by birth rather than by naturalization. This negotiation will enable them to earn *'political capital'* and more power, differentiation, and vertical claims that they can make on the Thai state or those more powerful. The example of highest success in their negotiations is the declaration of Nationality Act 2012 (No. 5), which added the definition of 'Thai diaspora' separate from other aliens or minority groups. Therefore, the returning Thai diaspora can be

granted Thai nationality by birth, not by naturalization. They will have the opportunity to earn their 'political capital' after living with legal obstacles and oppression for a long time.

Conclusion

The returning Thai diaspora has a cohesive history, consciousness, and identity with Thai people, but not the rights and powers with which to access livelihood assets/capital in Thai society. They must face the 'homeland' when they return and confront legal obstacles, oppression, and painful adjustment. 'Risk' is the core idea in formulating their choices as they often do dangerous work and may be cheated of wages or loses their capital when policies change. Members of the returning Thai diaspora lose political rights at all levels; therefore, 'political capital' is a significant asset/capital for their livelihoods. 'Home' and 'homeland' are the concepts for negotiating with the Thai state and having more rights and privileges as Thai citizens than other aliens or minority groups. In this way, the returning Thai diaspora's negotiations may create a 'social norm' that encourages policy makers to be aware of people in vulnerable contexts who claim their rights and begin to play an active role as citizens**,** as the returning Thai diaspora are doing.

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